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ABSTRACT

With the help of programs such as the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSDR) program--which provides funding to schools to help them improve student performance--the number of models for school reform has increased in recent years. These models of reform represent a wide range of ideas about the best ways to effect change in low-performing schools. In May 2000, model developers from CSDR schools, along with other educators, met in a 2-day conference to discuss the challenges in adopting comprehensive reform models and in making them work. This article presents the developments from that conference and serves as a guide for those looking to implement change in their schools. Specifically, it discusses six common issues that emerged from the conference as keys to successful and meaningful educational improvement. The six issues are as follows: (1) the crucial resource of time; (2) state and district policies that support change; (3) getting off to the right start; (4) strong, consistent district and school leadership; (4) ongoing professional learning; (5) evaluations aligned with goals and sensibly timed; and (6) sustained vision and momentum over the long haul. (WFA)

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Comprehensive School Reform: Perspectives from Model Developers.

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Comprehensive School Reform

Perspectives from Model Developers

Schools across the nation are responding to the call for comprehensive reform as the key to real and lasting school improvement, especially for low-performing schools. More than a decade of looking hard at school reform has taught us that piecemeal efforts don't work. Only schoolwide change aimed at aligning all parts of the system — standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment — can enable every student to succeed. The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program is a major nationwide effort to support this approach. Initiated by a federal appropriations act in 1998, CSRD provides three-year funding to schools, through competitive grants administered by state departments of education, to improve student performance.

A key element that sets CSRD apart from other reform initiatives is its requirement that schools adopt proven, research-based models to jump-start their efforts to substantially improve student achievement. Schools applying for CSRD grants are required to implement the comprehensive focus set forth in the federal legislation, which includes: effective, research-based, replicable methods and strategies; a comprehensive design with aligned components; ongoing professional development; measurable goals and benchmarks; support from school staff; parent and community involvement; external support and assistance; evaluation strategies; and coordination of resources.

Some 1800 schools have received CSRD funding so far, and more will be funded in subsequent rounds. Thousands more schools not funded by the CSRD initiative are also implementing these models, through the reallocation of state or local resources. This rapid increase in demand has put tremendous pressure on model providers — a tidal wave, one model developer has called it — to scale up their ability to assist schools. The number of model providers working at the national level has also increased significantly. These models represent a wide range of ideas about the best ways to effect change in low-performing schools. Some concentrate on school management, while others focus on curriculum. Some are more comprehensive in scope than others. But the fundamental intent of every model is the same: to provide the structure and strategies low-performing schools need to significantly improve achievement for all students.

As staff from these reform models completed their second year working with CSRD-funded

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schools across the country, providing technical support and implementation assistance for schools' comprehensive reform plans, WestEd thought it timely to bring them together to share what they had been learning. What are the real challenges in adopting comprehensive reform models and in making them work? What barriers are they struggling to overcome? What are the tough issues that need resolving? And what are the implications for policymakers?*

In May 2000, WestEd organized a two-day working conference in San Francisco to bring model developers together. We invited those who were working in one or more California CSRD schools, or who were implementing their model in at least five CSRD schools nationwide. Invitees were encouraged to assemble teams of two to four key decisionmakers to participate in deep conversation and exchange ideas about the challenges they face in effecting change in low-performing schools. The conference was also a unique opportunity for the people doing this work to network and build new collaborative and supportive relationships. Over 80 staff from almost 30 CSRD models accepted the invitation. Also participating were representatives from the U.S. Department of Education CSRD program office, the California Department of Education, and the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform.

Through presentations, whole-group activities, and facilitated small-group discussions, we posed questions of common concern to model developers. The framing questions for the conference are listed below.

Working with states and districts

1. In your experience, how do states support schools in reform? What is the biggest challenge you face at the state level in supporting schools with whom you work?

2. What is the biggest challenge you face at the district level in supporting schools with whom you work?

Evaluation

1. What obstacles arise for you in evaluating the effectiveness of your model?

2. What challenges are you finding that schools face in assessing student learning?

Professional development

1. What issues do you face in supporting deep teacher learning at school sites?

2. What challenges do you face around principal leadership?

Establishing and maintaining relationships with school sites

1. What issues arise in making sure your model and the schools with whom you work are a good match?

2. What's the biggest challenge you face in supporting ongoing effective implementation?

As seasoned model providers with varied experience exchanged views on these questions, certain common issues emerged as keys to success:

- the crucial resource of time,
- state and district policies that support change,
- getting off to the right start,
- strong, consistent district and school leadership,
- ongoing professional learning,

* Italicized text is used to identify quotes from conference participants.

- evaluations aligned with goals and sensibly timed, and
- sustained vision and momentum over the long haul.

These issues, not unfamiliar to those grappling with school reform, were probed with energy and fresh insight as participants shared experiences, explored solutions, and exchanged a range of practical tips. Across the board, the discussion was framed by a perspective on reform that should speak tellingly to policymakers and practitioners alike. Simply stated, comprehensive school reform is not about implementing a model, it's about organizational change.

Model developers and the schools they assist are operating in a world of policy expectations that tends to stereotype models as a quick fix — implement a model and everything will get better. But as developers are quick to note, the model is not the reform; it's a tool, albeit an essential one, to help schools achieve the reform. To be effective, a model must be implemented with care and fidelity. But it can't, in itself, solve a school community's problems. *It is important for everyone to make the distinction between a comprehensive school reform program and a school reform model. A model brings together strategies that the school can use to support its own comprehensive school reform program.*

A model can provide the focus and core of a comprehensive approach, but only if a school has conducted a careful needs assessment, investigated different options, and made a deliberate choice about which model to use. Even then, the school needs to consider CSRD funding and the model as part of a total package, in which different sources of funding, staffing, and strategies come together in a comprehensive approach targeted to helping students meet high standards.

It seems no small testament that experienced developers, with deep professional investment in their own models, clearly see that only this larger, deeper perspective can enable schools and districts to meet the set of challenges highlighted and discussed below. If we really understand what whole school change involves, then we understand the vital need for creating enough time to do it; grounding the work in informed up-front decisions; building vision, consensus, and ownership; ensuring effective leadership and meaningful support; forging a learning community; being realistic about timelines and outcomes; and doing what it takes to sustain momentum over the long haul.

Finding Time

Implementing a model is not a lock-step, plug-in endeavor, but a process of complex change. Every aspect of it takes time — time that stretches the bounds of current policy expectations and school operation. This reality colors every other issue, beginning with the decision to adopt a model in the first place. The question of time is fundamental and overarching, both conceptually and practically.

First, time is an issue of mindset. It is critical to have real understanding at every level — state, district, and school — that change cannot happen overnight. Schools most in need of change did not become low-performing schools in just a few weeks or even a few years; they cannot be expected to show significant improvement in a brief space of time. *Money is often given to schools in the worst shape with the expectation that they can effectuate immediate change, even though it has taken the schools years to get in such bad shape in the first place.* State and district policies must support giving schools time to assess and clearly understand their needs, and time to thoughtfully choose the right model. With an ever-increasing number of models available,

identifying the best match to the school's needs and culture is neither easy nor quick. Schools then need time to implement the model, evaluate its results, and make the necessary adjustments to continue to improve. *Pressure should be taken off schools to produce student achievement results in the first year of implementation. Other measures of change may be more significant, such as increased student attendance or more effective teaching and learning.* Model representatives made it clear that they are not afraid of accountability. But the goal must be to produce real learning sustained over time, not just an initial increase in standardized test scores.

Time is also an operational issue. Schools need the flexibility to restructure their day-to-day use of time in order to make the model work as a tool. Collective planning and setting of priorities requires considerable time. For example, virtually all model developers recognize the importance of providing teachers with common planning time, but state policies don't seem to support or encourage it. In some instances, union contracts limit the flexibility schools need to accommodate greater teacher collaboration. In California, state policymakers have instituted high-stakes accountability for schools, while simultaneously decreasing the number of state-allowed professional development days.

It also takes time to build trust. Model providers are usually outsiders. To become effective, they need time to understand and adjust to the particular culture of a given school, and to develop more than a casual relationship with the school community. The school must trust that the developer knows what needs to be done; teachers must trust that the model can improve instruction. Time is needed to develop a common language, provide meaningful professional development and other kinds of technical assistance, and engage in long-term, ongoing follow-up. And it takes time to assess progress and use the data collected to make needed adjustments to the implementation process.

State and District Policies That Support Change

State role. It seems obvious that state departments of education should play a crucial role in setting the stage for reform. Surprisingly, many model representatives reported having no contact with state-level staff and often had little knowledge of the state reform agenda affecting the districts and schools with which they work. One of the most positively received sessions at our institute gave participants the opportunity to become more informed about the California context and to explore issues of working effectively in the state. Even when developers do try to establish a working relationship at the state level, they find it difficult to access key people and information. State education agencies are often understaffed. *We often can't find the right person with answers to our questions. States should consider funding one less CSRD school and using the money to create a state-level reform support position.*

Model providers cited several key areas in which state policies could better support comprehensive school reform. The primary challenge, as noted above, is time. This is true particularly as it relates to unreasonable expectations about how long it takes schools to make thoughtful selections of the model best suited to meet their needs, the time required to implement the model and show improvement in standardized test scores, and the day-to-day time it takes to effect organizational change.

Financial support is one indicator that a state has made reform a priority. In California, for example, schools that show substantial growth on the state's Academic Performance Index are eligible for financial rewards. Another meaningful

way states can assist schools is to sponsor "fairs" at which schools can get information about various models. *The matching process of schools to models is very different, and much more effective, when states have model design fairs versus requiring schools to choose from a restricted list of providers.* Some state education agencies have encouraged dialogue between model providers and schools, while others seem to have already made many decisions for the schools. Participants agreed that schools with direct access to model providers have a better chance of ending up with a model that matches their needs and school culture.

State policies governing the adoption and purchase of curriculum materials present a significant challenge to some models. If the materials used by a curriculum reform model are not on the state-adopted textbook list, a school will have more difficulty adopting that particular model. *Big textbook providers who align their materials to the state standards and have the resources to "play the game" often end up squeezing research-based curriculum models out.* Model developers would like to see states create more flexibility for schools to adopt the materials that will best meet their needs and goals, especially those schools choosing to work with a research-based model that offers curriculum materials as part of its package.

District role. While some schools have achieved success without the active support of the district, or even in spite of the district, it's clear that the district can play a strong role in increasing the probability that school reform will succeed. Unfortunately, *district officials are not always as supportive, interested, or passionate about change as some schools.* In many cases, schools have the primary responsibility for increasing achievement without the authority to make many of the decisions necessary for successful reform. School site control over decisions regarding building level personnel, textbooks, and materials optimize a school's ability to implement a model as it was designed.

Participants stressed the importance of clarifying up front the expectations of the district and what role the district will play in reform efforts. A careful alignment at the beginning among district, school site, and model developer expectations can make successful outcomes more likely. What does success look like from the district perspective? How can the district strike a balance between exerting the pressure that needs to be put on low-performing schools to ensure that change will occur, and providing the support they need to succeed? Unfortunately, *districts tend to have a culture of compliance rather than having policies that promote true accountability.* Given the many regulations and federal and state mandates that districts must track and enforce, compliance rather than in-depth reform is too often the norm. By adjusting their policies to support the implementation of school reform models, districts can play a key role in promoting a change from compliance to accountability; but districts do not usually have the same accountability pressure as school sites. In California, for example, it's not the district, but the school site that is subject to sanctions if it does not meet state-mandated improvement goals.

Model representatives agreed that districts can play an important role as resource broker for reforming schools, starting with providing assistance in finding the model that will best meet school needs. Schools need time and materials to research models, as well as funding to enable them to attend model fairs and to observe models being implemented in demonstration schools with characteristics similar to theirs. Once a model has been chosen, the district can assist with the contracting process between school and model provider.

While districts can provide information and assist schools in narrowing down their model

choices, participants strongly recommended that the district offices avoid mandating a particular model. In this case, one size does *not* fit all. From the support providers' perspective, mandating model adoption can be a major barrier to building vision and ownership at the school site. They stressed that when schools are told to adopt a model, effective implementation becomes an uphill battle. A representative of a large urban school district reported the greatest success when the district did not choose the model — *schools decide the fit; we supply the support.*

Another essential resource that districts can provide is access to data. Model providers noted that schools need pertinent data during the process of assessing their needs and selecting the best model to meet those needs. Later, they need disaggregated data to determine whether the reforms are meeting the needs of all student subgroups in the school. Finding ways to use data in helpful, not punitive ways, the district can offer the critical information services that the school needs to make informed decisions and necessary adjustments along the way. The models saw this use of data as an essential component in working with schools to reach their student achievement goals.

Districts can also ensure the continuity of leadership that is so key to successful comprehensive reform. It is very difficult for schools to carry on the work of reform when the superintendent changes frequently or when the district office continually reorganizes its staff or structure. Even more critical is sustained leadership at the school level. Many districts have policies of moving principals around at regular intervals, or other policies that do not support the ongoing, long-term work required for true reform. Schools embarking on the difficult road to real reform need assurance that the principal who is committed to that reform will remain long enough to see it through. Policies that place teachers in schools based on seniority, without the deliberate choice of the principal, can also undermine staff ownership of and commitment to the reform model. The principal needs the authority to select staff who will buy into the program and who are willing to do the hard day-to-day work of reform.

Additionally, participants felt that *districts need to be intolerant of those not meeting expectations, especially those in positions of reform leadership.* And they need to allow site administrators to make the staffing decisions necessary to support implementation of their respective model — such as changing staff positions or ratios, creating new positions, or getting rid of staff who are not supportive of the reform effort. *A school where more than half the teachers are on emergency credentials doesn't have the capacity or cultural stability to adopt one of these models and make it work.* Conference participants agreed that if districts expect reform to succeed they must be willing to support the effort with policies that enhance, not undermine, the program.

The district can also help a school access the resources it will need to carry on the reform once the CSRD grant has ended. Experiences with schools that are implementing models have convinced many developers that schools are not ready to end the relationship after only three years; additional training and follow-up will likely be necessary to sustain and increase student improvement. Many models require additional school staff, such as tutors or a program facilitator, and these positions need to be continued, supported with local funds.

Participants suggested that another way districts can assist schools is in accessing professional development that the model may not provide. For example, a school may adopt a curriculum model that does not include work a school may also need to do to restructure its decisionmaking process.

Finally, models appreciate the advocacy or public relations role districts can play in ensuring that the public has accurate information about the reform effort and understands what is happening, why, and what to expect.

These are some of the ways that participants told us they would like to see districts act to enhance and support their reform efforts. It is important, however, that the district role be supportive rather than dictatorial. The school site should be given the freedom and authority to use its resources as it sees fit.

Getting Off to the Right Start

Choosing the model. Model representatives agreed that an essential ingredient of successful school reform is informed, up-front decisionmaking by all parties. Success requires that schools first get a good fix on their needs and capacities, look hard at where they are now and where they want to be, then choose the model that best fits. To begin, schools must thoroughly and carefully assess areas needing improvement and their own readiness for reform. Often, they need outside assistance to do this. *Low-performing schools do not know what they need to do to improve or they would be doing it.* In California, selected low-performing schools received planning grants and were required to hire an external evaluator to help them develop a reform plan. District staff can also provide this assistance.

The model should be seen as part of an overall comprehensive plan to improve teaching and learning for all students. Again, the model itself is not "the answer," but a tool to help the school achieve its own student-centered improvement goals. The planning process requires getting clear about what the model does and does not provide, identifying what other resources may be needed, and determining how they will fit together within the framework of the overall reform plan. *Not all schools need a comprehensive model — some may only need to change one thing or work on one aspect in order to spark change.* All parties involved need to be clear about what is intended to happen and what outcomes are expected.

Too often this process of assessing needs and establishing clear, reasonable expectations gets short shrift. Constricting time frames, often imposed by the state, press schools to choose a model quickly, crunching the time needed for the thoughtful research of models that best ensures a good match. Conference participants saw this as a tough but critical question that must be better dealt with. In some instances, certain models may be strongly supported by the district, even imposed on schools, effectively prohibiting school staffs from making a deliberate, considered choice. *Politics and personal preferences are the unfortunate reality of how decisions about reform models are made.* Model providers worry that schools too often choose the models that are the simplest to understand or have the most colorful materials. They reported that in their experience, schools do not always take time to investigate the models carefully. For example, *some schools take on reform programs not because of the model provider's philosophy about school reform or the desire for change, but for the technology, money, and equipment or materials the model can provide.*

Model developers, themselves, need to get a good read on a school's culture and readiness for the changes required. Schools' readiness for reform was a major concern of institute participants. Too often, schools are really not ready to implement the model they have chosen. Underlying structural problems need to be addressed first — *a fundamental issue of chronically low-performing schools is that they need prerequisite work prior to implementing the model.* Certain basic elements have to be in place in order to proceed. *Professional development for school reform cannot occur in schools where*

classrooms are out of control and teachers do not have basic instructional skills. There are models that focus on creating a framework and structures for change, models that focus on curriculum and instruction, and models that have a more comprehensive approach. No one model can meet all of a school's needs. Given that reality, fitting the model into the overall context of the school's needs and goals, being clear about what the model does and does not do, and planning how to fill the gaps all increase the probability that the model will do what it is designed to do.

Building vision and ownership. An important part of getting off to the right start is involving all stakeholders in the decision to adopt a model. *If you don't get complete commitment from the school community, you fail.* Taking the time to inform and involve school staff, parents, and the wider school community in the process of choosing a model enhances buy-in and commitment. Many models require a vote of a significant percentage of the teaching staff at a site before they will agree to work with a school. Building consensus within a school is critical.

There is a difference between ***buy-in*** *— staff's belief that the program is good and can work — and* ***ownership*** *— staff's belief that it's their program and they need to make it work. The former does not automatically lead to the latter, and the latter is necessary for the reform to succeed.* Initial buy-in indicates a staff's willingness to participate in implementing the model and do the hard work of changing their practice. But initial buy-in is not enough. For reform to be sustained long enough to have an impact on student learning, buy-in has to evolve into ownership. Ultimately, participants agreed, the changes required for effective reform must be integrated into the culture of a school.

Leadership

One of the biggest challenges of comprehensive school reform, participants agreed, is the need for a new kind of leadership. *Building leadership is an essential variable for success.* Schools undertaking this kind of reform work need strong, stable, visionary, and committed leadership that focuses on instruction rather than on management alone.

Model developers identified several key issues regarding leadership. First of all, they agreed that this kind of leadership takes courage. As they noted from their own experiences, the work of transforming a low-performing school does not usually take place in an optimal environment. Unreasonable time lines, expectations, and policies often undermine the process. *It takes courage on the part of the school leadership to stick with a program long enough to see results.* A firm commitment to do whatever it takes to ensure success is needed, and this can involve "bucking the system" in many ways. Obviously, a supportive district that gives the site leader the authority to do what's necessary helps enormously. But even without it, a courageous, visionary leader can still find ways to get the job done. Having a clear vision and strong commitment can help the leader make decisions when, for example, the district and the model provider appear to have conflicting expectations or requirements.

A reform leader needs to be a learner. The principal must see himself or herself as a catalyst for the change process. Valuing and modeling risk-taking sends a clear message to staff that the reform includes everyone. It also indicates that there is an acceptance of trying new things and learning from those experiences. The more involved the site leader is in the professional development and ongoing learning of the staff, the more likely teachers are to make the changes that reform requires.

Model developers have learned that they must pay careful attention to leadership at both the district and site level; they cannot assume that the principal is the automatic leader of the effort. For many site administrators, comprehensive reform and the leadership it requires necessitate a new set of skills. School leaders need training and support, as well as mentoring and opportunities to network and share with other administrators who are also committed to comprehensive reform.

Participants shared a number of ways to provide support to school leaders. Several models have created principal support networks; some match a new principal with one who is experienced with the model and can provide mentoring and encouragement. A number of models have developed training specifically for principals, including leadership skills. Participants stressed the importance of providing opportunities for principals to attend training away from their sites and be learners themselves. Another idea for supporting leadership is taking advantage of technology — creating online support opportunities through chat rooms and listserves. Model providers are struggling with finding ways to support principals as reform leaders. They acknowledge that people-to-people, one-to-one contact is expensive and hard to do at scale; but at the same time, they emphasize the critical importance of ensuring that site administrators have the skills and support they need to effectively lead the reform effort.

Building a Learning Community

Model providers understand that successful reform requires a new way of thinking about professional development — not as one-shot events, but as ongoing and job-embedded opportunities; not just for learning individual skills, but also as part of building a learning community that includes every member of the school staff. *We need to move beyond the "drive-by" approach to professional development, to create a true culture of learning.* This requires that those planning professional development have a deep understanding of the needs of the school, which takes time. *If an initial period of building consensus and developing goals exists for all stakeholders, then a quality professional development process can emerge from that.*

One model representative spoke of finding the right *entry point* into the school, identifying those areas where initial professional development is most urgently needed. *Start with the basics, which can be different at different sites, then build.* If, for example, classroom management is a problem, it would make sense to address that issue first, then build other professional skills on top of that.

Individual school staff have different needs as well. Model providers have learned the importance of meeting teachers where they are; experienced teachers, new staff, and those on emergency credentials typically need different levels and types of professional development. The need to build a new store of common knowledge and to create a common learning vocabulary was a pervasive theme across models. School reform often requires deepening teachers' content knowledge, as well as developing effective strategies for standards-based practice. It necessitates *a shift from a tips-and-techniques kind of professional development, typical in the past, to a thinking-and-reflecting process.*

The challenge is to create a culture that recognizes teaching as a learning profession. In such a culture, staff have the time and inclination to learn, reflect, and help each other with new kinds of instructional strategies; informal learning opportunities are structured and embedded in the life of the school; and teachers can take risks in a safe and nurturing environment. Developing this kind of culture

takes time; it does not happen overnight. Moreover, it requires a significant shift in mindset — *professional development should be based on the needs of students rather than the convenience of teachers.*

Many model representatives reiterated the amount of time required for effective professional development. If professional development is to be based on the needs of students, then teachers require time to look together at student work, to develop and learn how to effectively use multiple assessment measures, and to learn and implement new strategies. Teachers must have the time and opportunity to observe, coach, and learn from one another — to take advantage of *the power of informal learning*. It means that teachers will be recognized as in-house experts, empowered to be true instructional leaders. As noted earlier, such job-embedded professional development is a journey, not an event — a constant work in progress to embed ongoing adult learning into the daily life of the school, rather than limiting it to three or four district-mandated days during the school year. This new approach to professional growth requires, too, that teachers *weed the garden*: they cannot continue doing the same things they have always done in the same way they have always done them.

There are many barriers to creating this kind of learning community in low-performing schools. We have already noted the problem of time. *Schools often need more professional development days than are available from the district or state. Yet some model providers build 15 to 20 days of staff development into their first-year implementation plan. Yet, the state [of California] for example, provides only 3 days.* Union contracts in some districts limit schools' ability to use time more flexibly, such as adding minutes to some school days and shortening others to bank time for additional staff development. Aggravating the situation are two characteristics common to many low-performing schools: a higher percentage of teachers on emergency credentials who require a different kind of support, and high teacher turnover, causing model developers to feel like they must virtually start fresh each year with their professional development efforts.

Due to class size reduction in some areas, it's hard to get enough substitutes to take over classrooms so teachers can be freed up for training or collaborative activities. Even when substitutes are available, the number required to enable this level of professional development can be very costly to the school.

An additional barrier to creating a learning community in low-performing schools is teachers' lack of access to the kinds of data necessary to help them understand the instructional needs of their students. Even if they can get the data, many lack both the time and skills to do the kind of analysis that's required.

Participants shared creative ways to deal with some of these barriers, such as using technology to provide additional ways for teachers to get help and support. But they agreed that the most important change that needs to occur is an attitude shift — one that starts at the policy level and reaches down to individual school staff members. Everyone involved must understand that comprehensive school reform, and the adoption of a model, is not another reform "phase." This kind of change requires not only the long-term commitment to provide time and institutional structures needed to accommodate effective professional development, but a deeper kind of understanding as well. Those engaged in reform must recognize that this effort is not about adding one more layer on top of what may already be in place at the school. It's not one more thing to do. Rather, it's about uniting them into a comprehensive whole. A theme heard repeatedly at the conference is that the conversation must change at every level.

Evaluation and Outcomes

The conference included two facilitated conversations on the topic of evaluation — one concerning how model developers evaluate the effectiveness of their work and the other concerning the challenge of measuring student outcomes. Model providers face a common difficulty in evaluating their designs: being able to isolate this "one thing" — the model — as having the impact. In the reform process, multiple factors at work, and the complexity of the context in which the work takes place, make it hard to determine cause and effect. So teasing out the effects of the model — and identifying and accessing the kinds of data needed to do that — can be difficult. *Student performance assessment is not* [the same as] *program evaluation.*

Another need cited by conference participants is the coordination of multiple evaluations. A number of evaluations of the CSRD program are going on concurrently at different levels; there are federal and state evaluations, and many states require local evaluations as well. Some of the relevant concerns brought up by model staff included questions like: *Who is responsible? At what level? For which piece? How are findings shared?* Most models have their own evaluation plans, but those plans may not align with required federal and/or state evaluations.

Model developers reiterated that they are not afraid of accountability, but that they are very concerned about the unrealistic pressure on low-performing schools to show immediate improvement. They know from first-hand experience that the "implementation dip" is real — things do, indeed, usually get worse before they get better. Policymakers must recognize that scores may not change the first year. During that time, schools are often laying the groundwork necessary for reform to occur. As noted earlier, the emphasis needs to shift to methods that extend and sustain student learning, which will result in meaningful improvement in student scores, rather than on quick fixes, which may produce a temporary blip in scores but don't yield real long-term growth. Model providers want policymakers to understand this, and to explore alternative ways — besides standardized test scores — to inform stakeholders about the positive changes and improvements that are taking place at school sites.

Another concern that arose during conversations about outcomes and accountability is the fact that state-driven assessments are not always aligned with state standards. This is a serious barrier to school reform. *The tested curriculum needs to match the taught curriculum.* At the same time, schools need to be strategic about what they teach, *since there will always be more to teach than there are hours in the day.*

Sustainability

We started with the issue of time, because it permeates every aspect of comprehensive school reform. A related issue, with which we end, is sustainability: ensuring that the reform becomes a part of the school culture over the long term. Schools participating in the CSRD program receive federal funding for a maximum of three years. How do they ensure that the reform effort will continue after the federal funds are no longer available? In many cases they will still have a long way to go to reap the real benefits of having adopted a model. Some of the more comprehensive models have numerous components that may take several years to completely put into place. Everything can't change at once, especially in a low-performing school that may have many complex problems to solve. *Programs have a natural cycle — a beginning and an end. If the reform remains a program, it will have a cycle and will end. If the reform becomes a culture within the school, then it will stick.* Because most models require that schools use their money, materials,

time, people, and other resources in new ways, how the reform will be sustained needs to be carefully planned from the beginning.

Sustaining the reform means sustaining the vision, the enthusiasm, and the momentum in the school. It means continually building on what has been accomplished — difficult to do when there is a high degree of staff turnover at the district or school level. However, model providers suggested, this challenge can have a positive side. Each year can become an opportunity to *re-recruit, re-induct, and reorient the staff — not just new staff, but the entire staff.* Involving everyone in recommitting to the vision and goals of the reform effort can help sustain it over the long term. This also means that the relationship with the model should continue over an extended period of time.

One model, implemented in many places prior to the advent of CSRD with its three-year funding limit, had initially intended to "cut the apron strings" with implementing schools after three years. Developers believed that within that period of time, schools would be able to build the internal capacity to sustain the reform on their own. But the developers' experience proved them wrong. Staff turnover at implementing schools, coupled with ongoing improvements to the model itself, led the developers to conclude that their relationships with sites should continue indefinitely. They now renew contracts yearly, based on where the school is with the reform and what kinds of professional development and support it needs in order to continue to grow and improve.

State and district mandates can significantly affect a school's ability to sustain a reform over time. Participants cited numerous ways these policies conflict with the requirements of a model. For example, one district decided to mandate a particular reading series that had different materials, staff development requirements, and strategies than those of the model that the school was implementing. In some instances, teachers attended district-required workshops and learned techniques that were in conflict with what they had been instructed to do as part of the model, such as how students should be grouped for reading instruction. At the conference, several model representatives described problems created when a new superintendent or district-level curriculum director arrived with a different agenda for reform and new ideas about how it should be implemented. Participants agreed that reforms are more likely to succeed and be sustained if there is clear and ongoing communication between the state, the district, the school, and the model provider — who, thus far, has been the most likely to be left out of that loop.

Building open, honest relationships among all those involved in the reform effort, getting clear about expectations, finding ways to be flexible, and maintaining ongoing communication and collaboration among all stakeholders will increase the probability that the reform can be sustained. Included in this concept of communication, conference participants agreed, is access to the data needed to inform the conversation about how the reform is working and what adjustments are necessary in order to move forward.

Finally, and critically important, is the issue of model fidelity. All of the models included in the CSRD program are research-based and validated. That means they have been developed with attention to proven theories and strategies, and they have been shown to be effective in schools similar to the ones that later adopt the model. Conference participants felt strongly that if a school staff has indeed made a thoughtful choice of a reform model, *then they should trust that the model provider knows what will work in their context.* A model should not be adopted unless there is a commitment to implement it with care and fidelity. The model promises that a school will get certain results, but those results cannot be ensured unless the school commits to

implementing it the way it was designed. On this issue, participants were virtually unanimous.

Fidelity to a model does not, however, imply a cookie-cutter approach, or that one exact size will fit all. Every school is different; each school has unique needs. Model developers know that adjustments and adaptations to the model will have to be made. Optimally, they would like to see the school implement the model exactly as it was designed, gather data that reflect how the components are working, and then work collaboratively with the developers to adapt the model to the school's needs. Over time, the model should evolve from an externally fitted reform to one that is embedded in the culture and life of the school. When this happens, the reform can truly be sustained and continue to foster success even as the needs of the students change.

Next Steps

The two days model developers spent tackling these tough issues produced a wealth of new insights for all participants. But while much was learned from those who are digging in and doing the messy work of school reform, many questions remain. The challenges of working with low-performing schools in the fluid and complex arena of federal, state, and district mandates and expectations are many. WestEd plans to reconvene this group of model representatives, to continue to harvest what they are learning from experience and to collectively tackle more of the tough questions. The conversation about barriers and impediments to school reform needs to continue, as does the sharing of ideas for solutions and discussion about necessary steps to ensure that schools are really ready for reform. The expectations of states, districts, and schools need to be clarified and communicated, and model developers want to be included more deliberately in these conversations. Model staff are anxious to share their success stories, and to learn from one another's successes. They want to work toward developing a set of common practices that can be effective across schools and models. They are anxious to explore ways they can work together to improve the chances that schools will really be able to improve achievement for all the students they serve.

Model providers candidly discussed their concerns about the limitations of high-stakes testing. They see the need for multiple measures — for different ways to understand and tell the story of student improvement and increased achievement. *How can we operationalize accountability in practical ways? How do we ensure that it is used in caring ways, so that it is not about blame but about informing practice to positively impact students?* And they want to face head-on the issues of the most difficult students. *How can we have the tough conversations about the kids that our schools are systematically failing and why — and how will we tackle the underlying causes?*

We hope that sharing the perspectives of those on the front lines — those who are working with some of the neediest schools in the nation to improve the success of the students they serve — will inform the wider audience that is focused on comprehensive school reform. The model providers who attended our conference had a great deal to say about ways that policies at the national, state, and local levels can impact the eventual outcomes of these important endeavors. While at the end of the conference we were left with more questions than answers, a great deal was learned about what it takes to implement the kind of reform that will enable all students to succeed. We look forward to continuing the conversation.

WestEd's May 2000 CSRD model developer conference was planned by Tracy Huebner with Meg Livingston Asensio and Kim Taylor. This proceedings document was authored by Asensio and Jim Johnson. For more information, contact Meg Livingston Asensio at 1.562.1799.5150 or by email: mliving@WestEd.org.

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